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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the 3-year development of the Language Resources Centre at the University of Southampton. The Centre provides a range of self-access resources and facilities in a pleasant working environment for language learners. It offers assistance for languages taught at the university as well as for languages not taught at the university. Resources include reference and course books, audio and video libraries, and topic boxes of information, with increasing additions of computer-assisted learning techniques. General Centre objectives cover learning, teaching, research, and academic management. Other topics discussed in this report include Centre costs, staffing, users, training, evaluation, and materials design. The Centre itself has been moving toward a more open learning approach where both teaching staff and students can meet; this has also facilitated the introduction of new and interesting ways of integrating class teaching and the open learning approach in the classroom. This change in pattern of teaching and learning has resulted in increased student and staff motivation, greater learning effectiveness, and an increased use of the target language materials. The use of modern technology and equipment has improved the learning and teaching process with important skills that are more and more commonplace in many spheres of everyday life. (Contains 12 references.) (NAV)

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MANAGING OPEN LEARNING

Vicky Wright

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MANAGING OPEN LEARNING

Vicky Wright

1 Introduction

1.1 The resources and facilities

The Language Resources Centre within the Language Centre, itself an integral part of the School of Modern Languages at Southampton, has expanded over the last three years to provide a range of self-access resources and facilities in a pleasant working environment for language learners throughout the university.

Starting with a small one-room library, a teaching laboratory and a smaller self-access laboratory, the Centre now offers multi-media[1] language learning materials in four linked resource areas. The two heavily used laboratories remain, with the addition of a small satellite television viewing corner to relieve pressure elsewhere. There is also a reading room offering a quiet working environment, dictionaries, a number of foreign language newspapers and journals and a language teaching library. The two remaining areas offer a variety of language learning resources for all the languages taught within the School of Modern Languages (Catalan, Dutch, EFL, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish) plus a selection of self-access courses covering lesser-taught languages.

The resources in the main self-access areas are constantly being developed but include: reference and course books; audio and video libraries; topic boxes (easily portable storage containers offering selected laminated texts, audio and video recordings, together with associated exercises, activities, glossaries and transcripts) and boxes with a language level or skill focus often consisting of published materials cut up into individual working units, put together with a

[1] There is increasing confusion over the term ***multi-media***. Multi-media usually refers to the availability of what are often related materials in different media, ranging from the printed page to audio and video recordings. These are often referred to as the traditional media. ***Multimedia***, on the other hand, increasingly refers to the availability on a single piece of computer software, or at a single computer work-station, of a range of media which might include print, audio and video. ***Hypermedia***, a more recent computer term, refers to 'libraries of multimedia materials which can be accessed in a non-linear, random fashion' (Emery, 1993: p.68).

key, and then laminated. There is a certain amount of traditional CALL software available but we are adding an increasing number of computer-based language and research tools, ranging from concordance packages, electronic dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopaedias and multimedia materials, through foreign language wordprocessing with grammar and spell-check facilities to newspapers on CD Rom, email and access to the campus network and Internet. (See Mar-Molinero and Wright, 1993, for a more detailed description of types of resource available and the rationale behind their organisation.)

Individual computer workstations together with audio and video playback facilities available throughout the area encourage the integration of media and allow learners to work with a range of resources in one location. The layout of the working areas also allows learners to work collaboratively around tables if they wish, while the portability of the resources enables materials to be easily distributed round a group or used by individuals in their favoured working corner.

1.2 The language learners and the open-learning continuum

If a completely open learning system is infinitely flexible and "learners can learn whatever they wish, for whatever reasons, wherever they choose, however they choose" (Lewis, 1986:70), then the many (around 30 an hour) and varied users of the Language Resources Centre could be seen at various points of an open-closed learning continuum. Learners range from the "drop-in" language learner (perhaps a member of staff or an overseas student who wants to brush-up on a language) who ask for very little guidance, decide their own language learning needs and plan their own course of work to the language learner (perhaps a student within the School of Modern Languages or a student from a science or engineering faculty studying a language as a small part of their degree) who has been directed to a particular set of materials and who must work through them within a pre-determined time-limit. Given the range of students we serve and their differing needs, the courses and the materials we provide will also necessarily be at varying points on the learning continuum.

Open learning does not only imply a high degree of flexibility and learner choice (open learning is increasingly being termed flexible learning: Wade, 1994), it also implies a view of learning as a continuing process, not just the acquisition of a set body of facts. It implies the development of learning

strategies and a move towards learner autonomy, taking responsibility for one's own learning (Little, 1990:70). As part of our own learner and staff training we provide, amongst other things, introductory familiarisation sessions, staff workshops, timetabled learner support, and language learning guides.

Open learning is also often associated with the use of new technologies and multimedia resources which allow a flexibility to teaching and learning which is perhaps especially valuable to the language learner. (See Mar-Molinero and Wright, 1993, for a more detailed overview of current theories in open learning.)

2 Aims and objectives

A resources adviser was appointed in 1991 with the specific aim of developing an open learning approach to language learning. General objectives covered four main areas.

2.1 Learning

- The provision of a wide range of resources to suit a variety of interests and needs;
- The provision of a richer language learning environment;
- The establishment of an environment in which students will develop more efficient and responsible learning strategies;
- The encouragement of greater learner independence.

2.2 Teaching

- The development of classroom and open learning methodologies for the mutual enrichment of both;
- The encouragement of a learner-centred approach to course and materials design;
- The development of new teaching/learning materials.

2.3 Research

- The provision of an additional context and source of data about foreign language learning;
- The provision of a stimulus for increasing second language acquisition research.

2.4 Academic management

— An investment for an uncertain future with increasing student numbers, rather limited financial resources and fewer teachers;
— The provision of a focus for staff development, discussion and stimulus.

3 Design considerations

Following on closely from thoughts on general and more specific aims and objectives there was a need to consider a range of factors over which we had either total, partial or no control.

3.1 The users

We had firstly to consider the users of the Centre, both learners and teaching staff, their needs, interests and expectations. An imposed learning situation which did not carry along its users was bound to fail. Basic PR work, the establishment of good relationships between users and providers, could only bear fruit.

3.2 The learning situation

The learning situation itself had to be examined within the wider context of the university as a whole. There was a need to consider, for example, the departments whose students were following courses within the Language Centre. We had also to consider general learning objectives and the degree of autonomy that learners should achieve together with the amount of self-instruction that was likely to be feasible.

3.3 Costs

More practical considerations involved the cost effectiveness of what we planned, what could be achieved with the space available together with future expansion possibilities. The design and layout would be particularly important if we wanted both to provide a pleasant working environment and to encourage particular ways of working.

3.4 Materials design

From the point of view of general materials design we needed to consider the type of materials we wanted to offer, how they were to be prepared, who was to be responsible for their preparation and whether there was to be a 'house

style'. If possible we wanted instant feedback from the users. There needed to be a consideration of copyright implications, of how materials were to be stored and displayed. Materials needed to attract the learner and be accessible, and any cataloguing system had to be user friendly.

3.5 Staffing needs

There needed to be a consideration of technical and secretarial support, materials producers and developers, advisers to support the learners, a librarian and at the management level, a coordinator. In practice this would probably mean a number of individuals acting under several headings. Added to these practical considerations there needed to be a discussion of general access and opening times and of maintenance of materials and equipment.

3.6 Training and evaluation

Final considerations were staff development and training, which would possibly be on-going; learner training, which could be achieved with the use of specially developed materials and experienced helpers; and lastly, general monitoring of patterns of use and evaluation of the whole project. Use could be monitored with regular 'snapshot' studies (e.g. Watson, 1993) and evaluation would need to consider increased use and command of the target language and, perhaps, changes in attitudes.

3.7 An evolutionary process

In practice, many decisions on design were made and are still being made as part of an evolving process. Trial and experiment have been important.

4 The planned and the unexpected: achieving our aims

It is probably too early to say how far we have achieved many of our original objectives but there have been many benefits in terms of motivation and general approaches to teaching and learning, in levels of learner autonomy and degrees of openness and cooperation between both staff and students and both within and without the classroom. There was at the outset, also, an unanticipated amount of resistance to change from many different quarters, from both staff and students.

4.1 Achievement of aims: learning

4.1.1 A richer language learning environment

Over the last few years language learners coming to the Language Centre have had easy access to materials serving a range of needs, interests and language abilities. Learners have the choice of approaching the materials from a topic or content-based viewpoint or from a language skill focus, or both. They can, for example, take up-to-date materials from the *Los Medios de Comunicación* topic box to find out more about the Spanish language media or they can equally well decide to focus on listening comprehension skills, grammar or vocabulary using the same materials. Learners have the choice of working on their own with self-access materials or in groups. With a wide variety of materials and working methods available we believe that we have provided a much richer learning environment, one where learning has become a less solitary affair and where self-access work and more formal learning can complement each other.

4.1.2 Development of efficient learning strategies and a move towards independence

It seems that learners are willing to be guided towards adopting appropriate learning strategies and to develop a degree of independence (Piper, 1992). Materials in the Centre are fairly easy to find once learners have asked themselves the question what type of materials they are looking for and what they want to use them for. Many materials for drop-in learners are colour coded for level, and self-assessment and needs-analysis questionnaires senstise the learners to their needs and direct them towards the appropriate materials. The labels on the boxes of materials and book shelves also help to sensitise the newly-arrived and untrained language learner to the type of language learning focus that it is possible to adopt. Some courses have also used learner diaries to help learners reflect on the learning process and on the learning strategies they use. Study guides (which focus on a particular area such as using the dictionary, writing a report or learning vocabulary) and access guides (which help learners locate relevant materials) are also available. We have found that these are particularly useful for non-academic staff introducing a new student to the Centre and for language staff who are not familiar with the resources.

We have learnt from experience that learners are willing to seek out what they need and even to experiment, but that a good 'tour' of the Centre is indispensable even if it means reaching several hundred students at the beginning of the year. The tour covers ways of using the materials and equipment available - "don't just sit and watch satellite television for an hour, you will achieve far more if you set yourself a learning task. As you watch the French news look at the newsreader's body language: how does it differ from a British newsreader's? Or write down and learn ten words you didn't know before." The tour is usually followed up by a familiarisation exercise, or quiz, in the target language, which asks questions about the materials and resources and gives some 'hands-on' experience of using them.

It is true that some students have resisted the move towards a self-access approach when teaching contact hours have been reduced for reasons of economy, but there are also learners who have become truly autonomous. One EFL drop-in learner was found to have developed a complete plan of study around a study guide listing ten steps towards improving general language learning skills.

4.2 Achievement of aims: teaching

4.2.1 The development of classroom and open learning methodologies

This has been a particularly interesting area where the presence of a resource base has led to the development of new and interesting ways of integrating class teaching and an open learning approach. The general aim has been to move away from a traditional course dominated by the classroom towards the expectation that learners will invest some non-class time in working through materials and activities available elsewhere. Second Year students of Spanish, for example (Mar-Molinero, 1993; Mar-Molinero and Wright, 1993), were asked to work through a number of materials in the Spanish *Ecología* topic box. Working in small groups, they were expected to monitor their work through diaries, build up vocabulary lists and prepare themselves for a class debate. They also had to find additional materials of their own. The lecturer's specific aims in this exercise were to push her students into taking greater control of their own learning, to widen their exposure to extensive reading and listening texts, to work more readily in supportive groups and to monitor how they themselves were learning (see the appendix for a full description of this programme by a teaching member of the Language Centre, initially uncertain of such an approach).

There are now a number of Language Centre courses which ask learners to work, either in their own time or in supervised self-access sessions, on key materials held in the Resources Centre. Many courses, such as the Master of Engineering with European Studies, find it particularly useful to base their syllabus around the use of topic-based materials, and the development of new materials for these courses is on-going.

Another member of staff (Paterson, 1994) has moved on a slightly different tack to make the maximum use of resources already held in the Centre by developing a self-access pronunciation workshop based on published materials. Frustrated for many years by the limitations of trying to deal with the individual problems of a mixed group of overseas pre-sessional students in a laboratory session, he has developed a diagnostic test which is administered to students and marked. Students are given a record sheet which suggests appropriate materials for their particular problem areas, and they then work away with enthusiasm on what is in effect a course specifically designed for them.

4.2.2 Further developments

The development of a resource base, an interest in self-access materials and an open learning philosophy have, in fact, led to further projects which have considerably widened the scope in which the Centre operates. The development of a series of integrated materials has continued along several fronts.

The Language Centre at Southampton has been working alongside the universities of Cambridge and Kent (CKS) in an HEFCE funded TLTP (Teaching and Learning Technology Programme) project to develop French and German topic-based self-access materials for use by undergraduate scientists and engineers in the UK. Design considerations here have very much followed the line adopted as a general principle for all our self-access materials. The learning focus should be relevant to the learners' needs, the materials should be flexible and, thus, often non-linear in outline. They should, where possible, be based around authentic texts in a range of media accompanied by activities which exploit the texts in such a way as to give the learners the necessary knowledge, skills and strategies to use the language meaningfully for themselves in a range of contexts. The materials should be motivating, well presented and offer full learner support by means of keys, transcripts and

notes. Extra flexibility is being added to the materials using the GUIDE hypermedia platform for related CALL activities. The project will be externally evaluated by CILT.

Further open learning possibilities have been offered by the multimedia platform MICROCOSM. In a second TLTP project which is developing the use of MICROCOSM at Southampton, the contents of the entire Spanish *Ecología* topic box (printed texts, video, audio, photographs, slides, exercises, keys, transcripts) have been incorporated in a single computer package which allows the learner to access any item (and any other language tool) in a flexible and exciting way. Although Microcosm based learning materials have been received enthusiastically by staff and students in other discipline areas their usefulness in a language learning context has not yet been evaluated. This will happen over the next few months but one First Year engineering student with access to a demonstration module which uses part of the CKS German materials (including the GUIDE CALL component) declared that she was unable to tear herself away! Present thinking sees the creation of a virtual multimedia language resources centre which would be available at a number of workstations across the campus as a distinct reality.

4.3 Language acquisition research

It is very tempting to believe that all that is new and exciting will achieve its stated goals - and to some extent if it is exciting enough it will do just that - but there is also a need to find out how and if those goals are achieved. Piper (1992) looked at the way in which the group of second year Spanish students mentioned in 4.1.1 above approached the learning task they had been asked to perform. She looked at the type and variety of strategies that learners employ and at their expectations and assumptions about language learning. She also monitored and evaluated the exercise in pedagogical terms. The findings were fairly revealing, showing that, for the most part, students did come to manage their own learning better even if they were not as aware as they might have been of how and why they had achieved this. These particular learners were new to the whole concept of learner independence and it does seem clear that the change in focus takes time to be accepted. Little (1990: 12) comments how difficult it is, in an examination dominated system, to shake a student's belief that a teacher's role is to prepare them to pass exams. These learners were just as product-oriented in their view of what they had achieved, and some were

resentful that they had invested time and effort and had not been given the opportunity to show all that they knew.

Another study (Randall, 1994) is looking at a group of learners at the other end of the open-closed learning continuum. Randall is looking at the language learning strategies used by truly self-directed learners, in this case overseas students who have come to the Resources Centre to work on their English and have not been directed to come as part of a language course.

4.4 Achievement of management aims

Not all staff and students have immediately welcomed the move towards a different teaching and learning environment. Others have been won over by very practical considerations and the need to cater for more students with fewer teaching staff and fewer contact hours. It may be that this very practical enthusiasm is in fact somewhat misguided, since the cost of provision of a full range of resources is not cheap, nor is the cost in staff time for development and clerical and technical maintenance of these resources.

4.4.1 Resistance to change

It would be naive to suppose that there has been no resistance to a change in the way things have 'always been done', to a re-thinking of the teaching/learning process and to the introduction of new technologies. To some extent this is the 'territoriality' aspect, the invasion of previously controlled territory. For some teaching staff this may mean a very distinct fear of losing authority, of losing control of the classroom and of what is learnt there. At office and administrative level these fears are no less real.

Learner resistance to change has been mentioned above. High-flying students who have achieved good results in an educational system dominated by marks and exams may be reluctant to take control of their own learning. They may be unable or unwilling to reconcile a system which is still product-oriented with new approaches to learning.

There is bound to be some institutional resistance to change, although at national level there has some been financial encouragement by the funding councils of more flexible course provision (Wade, 1994). Written examinations continue alongside more continuous forms of assessment and self-assessment,

if considered (see Blue, 1988), more often provides a means towards formative rather than summative assessment. This situation is likely to remain for the foreseeable future.

4.4.2 Increasing openness

Over time, much of the initial resistance has melted away, due as much as anything else, perhaps, to the enthusiasm of those who introduced the new concepts. This is as much true of the influence on students of an enthusiastic and inspiring teacher as on other members of staff.

The Resources Centre has steadily become a focus for both teaching staff and learners, where both can meet. The Centre has also been the location and stimulus for a series of practical workshops for School of Modern Languages staff.

5 Changing patterns of teaching aad learning: conclusions

5.1 Progress to date

A move towards an open learning approach has been rewarding in terms of generally increased motivation amongst staff and students, in terms of learning effectiveness and, we believe, since this has not yet been monitored, of an increase in use of the target language. It has also allowed us to respond quickly and flexibly to changing needs. Moreover, the use of equipment and up to date technology in the teaching and learning process gives important skills which are rapidly becoming commonplace in many spheres of life.

5.2 Implications for other language teaching/learning contexts: is increased learner independence the answer?

It is true that most language learners in institutional settings, especially schools, will not have access to a wide range of language resources and equipment, but a change in teaching and learning focus to a less teacher-centred approach can be achieved with minimal resources. Texts and exercises in plastic envelopes can be stored in cardboard boxes; perhaps there only needs to be one cassette recorder with a multiple headphone attachment. A box of games and activities, possibly a portable television and video player and a box of videos would all be valuable extras.

But the move to greater learner independence is not just dependent on the provision of interesting resources, it also depends on the willingness of the teacher to encourage that independence. Many teachers will need to ask themselves the question: "How can we enable the learners to function independently when the teacher is no longer there?" (Page, 1992).

In a rapidly changing and unpredictable world learners must be able to apply the skills they have learnt, the knowledge they have acquired, and they must have the independence to carry on learning and adding to what has been started in the classroom. The language teacher can and should be an important part of this process.

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Appendix

From *ecología* to *los medios de comunicación*: A Spanish Case Study

Romay Garcia

1 The background

The Second Year Spanish language course consists of 58 undergraduates from the School of Modern Languages taking either Single or Combined Honours degrees. Language levels are on a learning continuum from an *ab initio* First Year intake to native speaker. The majority are post A-level.

The course is structured round three class contact hours per week: one with a member of the Spanish Section who focuses on written texts (particularly newspaper articles), using them for comprehension and grammatical analysis (5 groups); one with the language assistant for oral practice (4 groups), and one with myself focusing on audio and video materials for aural comprehension (3 groups). Large classes now dictate that the aural comprehension classes take place every second week with self access work being set for the missed hour. This usually takes the form of a task (listening comprehension, oral presentation, video programme, diary or log) to be prepared for class, either with myself or the language assistant.

The language programme (piloted in 1991, see Mar Molinero, 1993) is taught via a succession of topics (*Ecología, Racismo, Nacionalismo, Política y Economía* and *Los Medios de Comunicación*), which permits a certain amount of cohesion and integration between the three classes.

The aims of the aural comprehension/self-access part of the course is to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning and to prepare them for their year abroad and the dissertation they will write while there. To that end, they are given focused tasks which require them to take advantage of the wider resources available to them in the Language Centre, and the University library if they so wish. All classes are conducted in the target language and students are also encouraged to communicate in Spanish while working in groups during the self-access hour. All handouts (course outlines, task descriptions, exercises) are in Spanish.

With more emphasis being placed on the language learning process than the product in this type of programme, assessment inevitably involves attendance

(i.e. participation). Since participation in the end product of a topic module usually pre-supposes preparation (particularly if the product is a video-recorded debate), this is not thought to be problematic. However, students often feel frustrated that their 'performance' is not commensurate with the amount of work they have put into a task and need constant reassurance that their efforts will be reflected and rewarded either in the more traditional, written assignments they submit or in the sessional exams.

Partly because of increasing numbers, students are increasingly being asked to work in groups and to submit group rather than individual projects. While this approach does indeed reduce staff marking time, its now almost universal application in a range of classes often results in group hysteria amongst students, bringing into question its ostensible objective: developing students' organisational skills. Individual students may find themselves working in three or more different groups in any given week, having to organise, contact and communicate with some 15 other students with different timetables. Having first responded to these very real difficulties by setting a module assignment for individual submission and regretting it, I subsequently attempted to ensure that most group activities could be carried out in the self-access hour. An inevitable problem with having only fortnightly classes is one of balancing the students' need to 'learn something new' (i.e. attend what they consider to be a traditional language class) with the need to monitor and/or evaluate the task completed during the previous week. Where possible we have tried to circumvent this by using the class with the language assistant for either presentation or feedback sessions. However, the physical structure of the course makes this difficult as students are grouped differently for each class.

The Topic Boxes are central to the resources the students are asked to use to research their projects. To date there are eleven of these boxes for Spanish, each dealing with a different topic. Students are also encouraged to watch satellite television (particularly the news) and videos from the general video library and to read the magazines and newspapers available in the Resources Centre.

2 *Los Medios de comunicación*

Perhaps the most fully integrated module studied recently, in terms of both cooperation and coherence between the three language classes and use of resources, was *Los Medios de Comunicación*. During the text-based class students

looked at censorship in the press and *televisión basura*. With the language assistant they looked at advertising in the Spanish media.

The three classes with myself were spent looking at the changing role of the media during the transition to democracy in Spain, Carlos Fuentes and the role of TV in contemporary Latin American society, and García Márquez on the telenovela and the interface between literature and film. These were all video-based activities. In addition, students were asked to complete a listening comprehension exercise in one of their self-access hours. This was discussed later in class. Twenty minutes of one class were set aside for coverage of a grammar point (*para* and *por*) for motivational purposes.

The self-access project for this module was to be the preparation of a 5-10 minute programme which the students themselves would record on video during the penultimate week of the six week module. As this was to take place during their hour with the language assistant, for reasons of practicality students were asked to form groups from within this class. Three groups arranged to borrow the video camera and to film elsewhere. Feed-back sessions were held during week 6, when the students watched their programmes with the language assistant. She and I then watched them and based our assessment on the contribution made by each student, research carried out, language use, innovativeness and participation, bearing in mind that one member of each group was behind the camera.

Students were given a fairly wide rein over the contents of their programmes, although it was suggested that they include two or more of the following: news and weather, an interview, a magazine programme, a documentary, advertisements, a *Mesa Redonda* discussion. Most did in fact stick to these guidelines, although one of the most spontaneous and entertaining was a Spanish version of *Blind Date*. Not surprisingly, this group contained some of the more confident and extrovert, if not competent, students.

All in all, despite much reticence and yawning when given the task ("we don't know what we're supposed to be doing","who'll work the video?") the vast majority of students became thoroughly involved in the activity and even enjoyed it, as the videos testify. Motivation was enhanced by giving the students a relatively free rein over their choice of programme in an area with

which they are culturally familiar (the media) and allowing them to produce it themselves and therefore perform to and for each other. In terms of evaluation and assessment it proved to be a good leveller for a group with such diverse language abilities. While some post A-level students simply read from a printed text, most *ab-initio* intake students put a great deal of effort and often research into their programmes and discussion topics. The usefulness of such an activity in reducing inhibitions also became apparent during a subsequent module, *Ecología*, where students were asked to stage a *Question Time* debate around previously prepared questions.

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